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Something to Talk About: The Intersection of Library Assessment and Collection Diversity

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Abstract

Academic libraries have increasingly recognized the need to collect diverse materials. Simultaneously, academic libraries need to continue to develop additional measures to evaluate collections for diversity as well as to connect collections to their users and their campus initiatives and priorities. This paper features perspectives from two academic libraries and shares how both are grappling with not only assessing collections for equity, diversity, and inclusivity, but also to place those collection efforts in the broader picture of institutional values and goals.

Introduction

The time has come for academic libraries to fully embrace a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) in their collections. As we modify our acquisition practices to develop diverse and inclusive collections and to meet the goals of EDI initiatives, we must concurrently develop assessment methods to evaluate our collections in relation to those initiatives. It is essential that academic libraries link assessment to their universities' values, goals, and interests. The paper showcases two ongoing projects from the intersection of library assessment and collection diversity.

Roxanne Backowski will share an example of a campus diversity initiative assessment measure, a result of a user-centered collection assessment project in relation to EDI undertaken at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire. Through quantitative and qualitative research methods, this research explores the effect of campus diversity initiatives and curriculum changes on the rate of use of library books. The findings suggest instructors are increasingly assigning content related to EDI due to campus diversity initiatives. Simultaneously, collection content related to EDI is being accessed at an increasing rate.

Tim Morton will outline a framework that the University of Virginia Library has developed to evaluate its global collections, with an analysis of its findings when applied to UVA's African Studies Collection. This framework is inspired by the #own-voices hashtag, which has been embraced by public libraries seeking to provide diverse works by diverse authors in their collections. He also discusses the

limitations of this framework imposed by current data standards.

Project Background at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire

At the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, two major campus diversity initiatives related to EDI were implemented in recent years. In the 2016–2017 academic year, a new liberal education framework was implemented, which included new EDI curriculum requirements. For example, one of the learning outcomes in the new liberal education framework is “Use critical and analytics skills to evaluate assumptions and challenge existing structures in ways that respect diversity and foster equity and inclusivity” (2015). The second campus diversity initiative at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, a personnel measure, went into effect in 2018. This personnel measure stipulated that all reviews of employees must include an evaluation of a faculty or staff member's EDI engagement. Contributions can be demonstrated through professional development, teaching, scholarly activity and curricular development, or engagement in initiatives that directly serve under-represented communities.

Questions regarding campus diversity initiatives and their impact on library collections have rarely been considered in library literature. Since the two campus diversity initiatives relate to teaching and curricular development, there could be an impact on curricular choices and therefore library collection use. This is the main research questions for this project: Are instructors at University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire changing the required materials they assigned

to students as a result of the two campus diversity initiatives, and what is the impact on the library collection?

Research Methods

Drawing from the assessment methods of Ciszek and Young (2010), the scope of assessment for this project was user centered, and a mix between qualitative and quantitative methods was employed. The qualitative methods included a survey and focus group of instructors, whereas the quantitative method selected involved e-book usage statistics. Concerning potential impact on the library collection, the scope was narrowed to e-books.

The survey and focus group, designed for faculty and instructional academic staff, sought to elicit many responses about curricular choices and required reading materials they assign to students. The survey concentrated on required materials assigned to students, as opposed to supplemental materials, due to an instructor's influence on students' engagement with materials. Questions directly related to the two campus diversity initiatives were included; participants were asked if they adapted or developed a new course as a result of either the new liberal education framework or the personnel measure. If instructors answered yes to adapting or developing a new course, then they received a question about the extent of material incorporated into the course related to EDI or social responsibility. The survey had 12 questions and took less than 5 minutes to complete.

At the end of the survey, participants were able to volunteer for the focus group. In comparison to the survey, the focus group questions were meant to go into depth about the process of identifying, selecting, and assigning course readings as well as what the library could do to make it easier to assign course readings, since this level of nuance could not be gleaned from the survey.

The goal of using e-book usage statistics was to determine the rate of use of EDI-related titles over three academic years. A "yes" or "no" determination based on the title of an e-book was given to 12,000 titles using the COUNTER Release 4 Book Report 2 for five different vendors/publishers. Criteria used to make the determination included content about a nondominant culture, content about identities, content about intercultural/interpersonal communication, social scientific literature, and professional

development materials. A major limitation of this coding is that only one person coded the data and their privilege and biases are likely to influence the data.

Results and Discussion

Eighty-four responses were collected from the survey, a 15% response rate. The survey revealed up to 75% of respondents add or swap out readings when preparing to teach a course again. Additionally, 77% of respondents said they are more likely to include content for required materials if it is available from the library. Regarding the campus diversity initiatives, 32% of survey respondents, or 27 instructors, said they had adapted or developed a new course. Of the instructors who adapted or developed a course, 75% of respondents said they increased the amount of reading materials related to EDI or social responsibility, 25% kept the same amount, and zero included fewer materials.

Thirteen people volunteered for the focus group and six attended, a wide representation from departments across campus. The questions in the focus group did not explicitly ask about diverse materials or campus diversity initiatives, but one participant mentioned in response to a question about how instructors select course readings, "Whose voices do I need to incorporate into my courses? EDI trainings over the past year have helped me realize I need more diversity: women, people of color," which references the campus diversity initiatives. Another faculty member said this in response to a similar question about selecting required materials: "The library ordered a video about native boarding school trauma. . . . Students hearing voices about people of color, helps promote familiarity and comfort. It helps humanize the voices of native people." This comment is illuminating regarding format and clearly points to the library's role in offering course content.

Concerning the rate of use of e-books related to EDI over three academic years, the rate of use increased slightly from 17% of all e-books categorized to 19%. However, COUNTER Release 4 e-book usage statistics are inadequate to make solid conclusions. While there was a slight increase in the rate of use of e-books related to EDI, the simple indicators of use in COUNTER reports cannot reveal the intent behind each use. Alternatively, significantly high usage of specific e-book titles, such as thousands of chapter downloads in one academic year, is likely being used by instructors and students in courses. Yet nuance

surrounding what influences instructors' choices, how often they swap out content, how they provided the content to students, or even if it was instructors using the content for curricular materials in the first place is usually an estimation at best without knowledge from liaison librarians or confirmation by instructors.

Qualitative methods in this research project produced more meaningful results. Survey and focus group results demonstrate that instructors are responding to campus diversity initiatives by changing the curricular materials they assign to students and adding more content related to EDI. In addition, if the library provides access to content electronically, this increases the likelihood instructors will assign it to students. From this data, one can conclude that the library and its collections contribute to the campus diversity initiatives and influence the overall value and strategic goals of the university. Therefore, next steps for this project are to share the findings of this project outside the library with faculty professional development offices, leaders of EDI training, and liberal education administrators and faculty committees. Libraries must continue to grapple with assessment methods related to collection diversity that also coincide with their larger institutions' goals.

Project Background at the University of Virginia

The Twitter hashtag #ownvoices was created by author Corinne Duyvis in 2015 "to recommend kidlit about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group." The idea is simple: if your collection contains children's literature about Latinx or LGBT characters, ensure that Latinx or LGBT authors have written them, and are able to tell their own stories. The #ownvoices concept has taken off among public librarians, who have also moved beyond kidlit to ensure that diverse voices are heard throughout their collections. There is a robust system of resources in place to support #ownvoices diversity in public libraries, including new book recommendation services, extensive author biographical sources, and a passionate and engaged librarian community.

The University of Virginia Library was intrigued by this idea and wanted to see how we could translate it to an academic setting. On the surface it seems obvious that it should, but there are several key differences between the academic and public library settings that may make an #ownvoices analysis substantially different when compared to public libraries. The collections at an academic library at

an R1 institution are massive in both size and scope when compared to a typical public library. We have millions of titles, written by hundreds of thousands of authors from around the world, written across the centuries, on every subject imaginable, and at every intellectual level from children's books to advanced scholarship. As a result, finding comprehensive and reliable author biographical information for our collection is essentially impossible. Furthermore, while public libraries find a natural synergy between #ownvoices and readers' advisory, books in an academic library are not easily substituted for a faculty member with specific identified research needs.

When looking at the available data that can be leveraged on the scale of our collections, we honed in on place of publication, and asked the following questions: Can we use the place of publication as a proxy to estimate the prevalence of #ownvoices material in our collections? In conducting this analysis, is there any other insight that place of publication can give us about our collection?

The Data

In response to broader institutional initiatives, we decided to test these questions with our African Studies Collection. We pored over the Library of Congress Classification Schedules and identified 137 distinct classes or subclasses related to individual African countries or Africa as a whole. We then identified 54,299 monographs in our collection assigned to those classes, and exported the following data for each: Title, Author, Publication Date, Call Number, Circulation, Place of Publication, Library Location, and Barcode. We also manually assigned some derived variables for each item: Publication Country, Publication Region, Publication Continent, and Subject. For items published in Africa, there were two additional derived variables: Historical Era (Colonial, White Rule, Independent) and Colonial Power (which European nation had colonized this country).

This massive data set does come with some limitations. First, it only includes monographs, so any journals, newspapers, or other serials were not analyzed. Second, there can often be multiple places of publication for a single item. For instance, one publisher may list London, New York, and Cape Town as the place of publication for any of their books. Thankfully these multiple places of publication were usually in the same country and we were able to dedupe items based on matching Barcode and Country of Publication fields. The remaining cases where

the multiple places of publication were in different countries amounted to under 9% of the total items. Third, due to our method of gathering items based on LC Classification Schedules looking for Africa as a subject, this list only contained items published about Africa, rather than all items published in Africa. The LC Classification Schedule would not have shown an Africa-published book on world history, general economics, or physics as “African,” and thus could not be included.

The Analysis

We had no solid estimate of the prevalence of Africa-published materials in our African Studies Collection

but guessed that it would be around 10%. Our analysis data shows that 32% of UVA’s African Studies Collection was published in Africa. As seen in Figure 1, Europe published the largest share of the collection, and the Americas were a close third, with publishing in the rest of the world being insignificant. When we additionally analyzed publication date, we found that the African Studies Collection peaked in the late ’80s and early ’90s, both in terms of the absolute number of titles and the percentage of titles coming from Africa.

The rough three-way split is repeated when we drilled down into the African-published content. Southern Africa and North Africa each account for

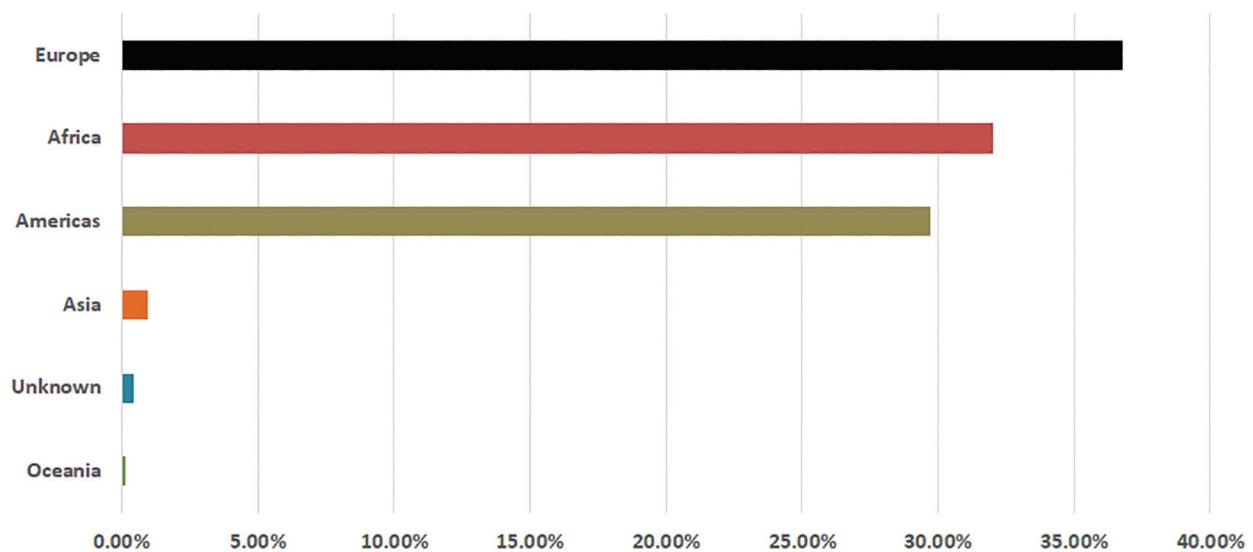


Figure 1. African Studies Collection by continent of origin.

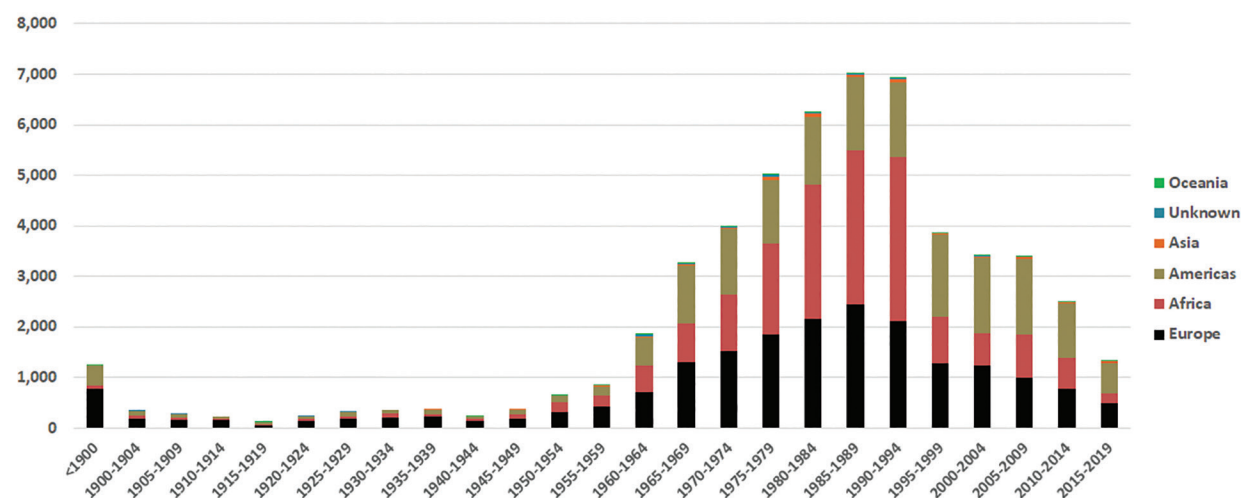


Figure 2. African Studies Collection by continent of origin and date.

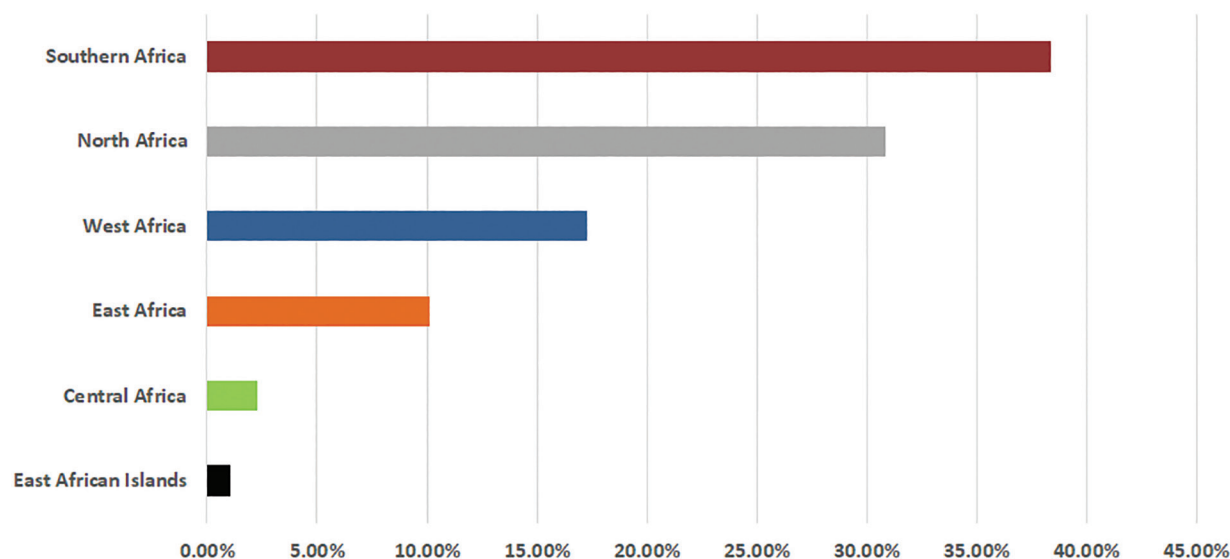


Figure 3. African-published materials by region.

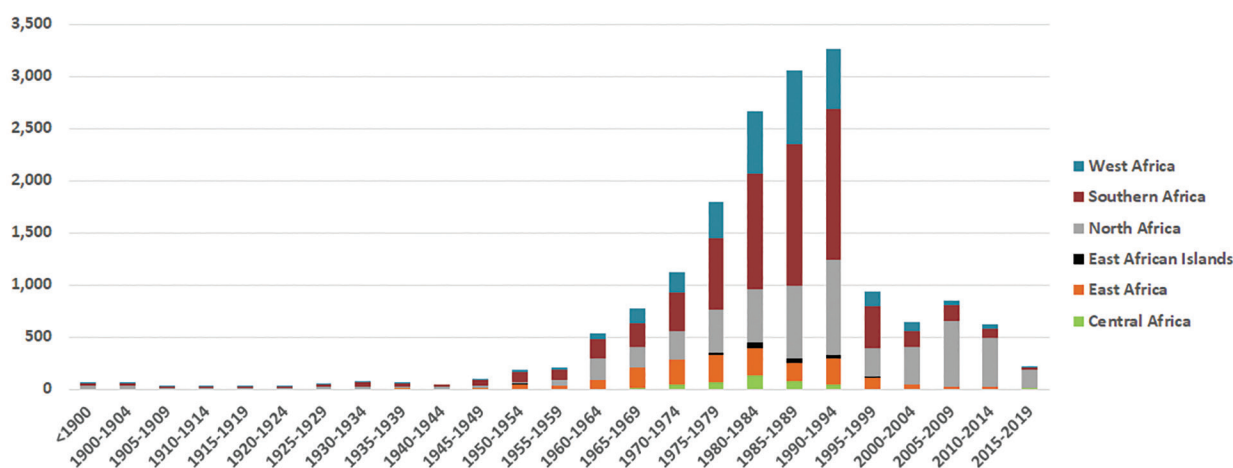


Figure 4. African-published materials by region and date.

roughly one-third of the collection, with the remainder of the continent together making up the final third. When publication date is included, the same late '80s/early '90s peak remains. This post-1994 collections drop-off also shows a dramatic shift from a relatively balanced collection to one that's focused almost exclusively on North Africa.

Does Place of Publication = #ownvoices?

Once we were able to break down the data into discrete groups of country and/or subject, gathering author biographical data for those smaller groupings became a much more reasonable task. In general,

our thesis seems to hold, and we believe that place of publication can function as a reasonable estimate of #ownvoices content. However, this is subject to a couple of caveats. First, in the case of African Studies (and presumably other area studies), both publication date and subject can significantly alter the #ownvoices characteristics of the collection. For example, when analyzing our materials related to African languages, it became clear that most of the collection was written during the colonial period by European missionaries seeking to translate the Bible and evangelize in those languages. It's valuable work, but not #ownvoices. Similarly, nearly all of our Afrikaans language and literature collection comes

from South Africa. While this does represent an #ownvoices perspective, it's important to remember that it contains the voices of a portion of that society and is rooted in the time/place/events when they were written.

Local Implications

In addition to showing the #ownvoices characteristics of our collection, this analysis gave us some additional insights into our African Studies collection. First, the collection is becoming increasingly dated and regionally exclusive, becoming a nearly exclusively North African collection over the last 25 years. To correct this imbalance, we need to establish relationships with new vendors to acquire newer content, particularly from sub-Saharan Africa. Second, there is a perceptible bias toward both tragedy and American national interest in our collection. For instance, regardless of place of publication, most of our materials on Rwanda or Somalia are about the genocide and U.S. intervention in the Somali civil war, respectively. Those are important stories to tell, but at present they are being told to the exclusion of the rest of those countries' stories. Third, and most importantly, our print African-published African Studies materials are being used! Our initial analysis of the circulation data suggests that this is one of the few areas of our print collection that is bucking the broader trend of declining print circulation and increased digital usage. In our conversations with colleagues at other institutions about their African Studies collections, this seems to be true at many institutions.

Broader Library Implications

Our analysis has also revealed some issues that the broader library community needs to address as a part of our commitment to EDI. First, while

assembling the list of Africa-related LC classes, it became clear that the Classification Schedules' (as well as the LC Subject Headings') terminology and ontology use obsolete and colonial language. In addition, while there is near-universal coverage for North America and Europe across the full range of subjects, many subjects do not have specific classes for even the continent of Africa, much less its individual countries. Finally, the Classification Schedules are inconsistent in assigning countries to broader cultural/geographic regions, making this type of analysis difficult to transfer to other area studies. Our analysis also revealed a clear need to have authorized fields to cover the country of publication. In addition to resolving ambiguous place names and creating a unified standard to replace the current free-text entries, an authorized place of publication field would also allow us to quickly analyze the entire scope of Africa-published content across disciplines, not just those that are related to Africa itself.

Conclusion

Since the article about "Diversity Collection Assessment in Large Academic Libraries" from Ciszek and Young (2010), the sophistication of our assessment practices as a profession has improved. We are not just counting how many materials we have but trying to figure out how and why collections are serving our institutions. We need to make sure our collections are representing diverse voices, our user populations, and unrepresented or marginalized populations. Incorporating #ownvoices and place of publication is an example of exploring new measures for diversity in academic libraries. At this point, assessing our collections for diversity and connecting them with our larger institutions' goals and values, such as campus diversity initiatives with library collections, is imperative.

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